

INTELLIGENCE BRIEFING

# The Gangs of Northern Syria: Life Under Turkey's Proxies





# The Gangs of Northern Syria: Life Under Turkey's Proxies

By Eizabeth Tsurkov

## Contents

Introduction .....	3	Economy .....	13
The Establishment of the Turkish-Dominated Zones .	4	A Highly Unequal Society .....	13
The SNA .....	5	A Dominant War Economy .....	14
Formal and Actual Structure .....	5	Smuggling and Arbitrage .....	14
Remuneration .....	5	Protection Rackets .....	15
Human Rights Abuses .....	6	Profiting from Dispossession .....	16
Turkish-Led Efforts to Reduce SNA Abuses .....	7	Business Empires .....	17
Crime and Punishment .....	8	Relations with HTS .....	18
Popular perceptions of the SNA .....	9	Conclusion .....	20
Security situation .....	10	Endnotes .....	22
Infighting .....	11		
Local Governance .....	12		
A Powerless Interim Government .....	12		
Local Councils .....	12		
Service Provision .....	13		

*The content and views expressed in this intelligence briefing are those of the author and should not be taken to reflect an official policy or position of the New Lines Institute for Strategy and Policy.*

COVER: The Syrian National Army prepares vehicles including heavy machine guns, rocket launchers and mortars for operation against the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) in northern Syria's Azaz district in July 2022 (Bekir Kasim / Anadolu Agency via Getty Images)

### The New Lines Institute for Strategy and Policy

**Our mission** is to provoke principled and transformative leadership based on peace and security, global communities, character, stewardship, and development.

**Our purpose** is to shape U.S. foreign policy based on a deep understanding of regional geopolitics and the value systems of those regions.





## Introduction

As many as 1.4 million of the 16.5 million Syrians who continue to live in the country after 10 years of conflict reside in areas under the control of the Syrian National Army (SNA), a proxy force established by Turkey.<sup>1</sup> These territories, adjoining the Turkish border, are made up of two pockets: the larger one spans from Afrîn in the west to Jarablus in the east, and the smaller one stretches from Tel Abyad to Ras al-Ayn. The SNA, alongside Turkish military forces, intelligence, state agencies, companies and NGOs, plays a dominant role in administering these regions. This report, based on dozens of interviews conducted over the span of five years with residents, Syrian officials, NGO workers, businessmen, community leaders, activists, members of several Syrian armed groups, and foreign diplomats, aims to present a comprehensive study of the security, armed actors, economy, and governance of these territories. All names of interviewees were changed to protect them from retribution.

The SNA advanced Turkey's military ambitions in Syria as well as during Turkey's interventions in Libya and Azerbaijan.<sup>2</sup> In Syria, the force has been deployed against the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces, which Turkey sees as the main threat in Syria. In Libya and Azerbaijan, thousands of fighters recruited from the



A soldier of the Syrian National Army stands on a truck mounted with heavy machine guns in the Azaz district of northern Syria. (Bekir Kasim / Anadolu Agency via Getty Images)

ranks of the SNA fought under Turkish guidance alongside Ankara's allies. The SNA diligently executed Turkish orders, even when the orders contradicted the desires of SNA fighters and damaged the reputation of the force in the eyes of the Syrians that the SNA claims to represent.<sup>3</sup>

At the same time, the SNA's criminality and predation have undermined secondary Turkish goals, including the goal of turning the areas under SNA control into a safe zone from which Syrians will not attempt to constantly flee across the border and would be willing to return to from Turkey. The policy of Turkey's ruling party, the Justice and Development Party (AKP), to

welcome Syrian refugees fleeing the war starting in 2011 and continue hosting the 3.5 million Syrians who have fled across Syria's northern border has been politically costly.<sup>4</sup> In an apparent attempt to appease Turkish voters, the AKP announced plans to build housing units in areas under its control in Syria and resettle 1 million Syrian refugees there.<sup>5</sup> However, even if the housing projects are built, few Syrians would return to an area experiencing high levels of insecurity, ruled by a hodgepodge of rapacious militias.

The corruption of the SNA also harmed Turkey's security, with Turkish soldiers and officers dying in bombings that occurred due to some SNA members cooperating with networks linked to the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) in exchange for money. The abuses perpetrated by the SNA also have damaged the international reputation of Turkey, whose attempts to rein in its proxies have rarely yielded results, except in cases when Turkish pressure was applied consistently.

However, the main victims, as usual in Syria, are civilians inhabiting the areas under the control of the SNA, after 10 years of war, displacement, and loss. Having reached or found themselves living under the protection of the Turkish state, many had hoped that they would finally enjoy stability and peace. They found anything but that.





## The Establishment of the Turkish-Dominated Zones

The creation of areas under direct Turkish control in Syria and their gradual integration into Turkey does not appear to have been clearly planned by Ankara, where no clear consensus emerged concerning the desired future of the SNA-held regions.

The gradual expansion of the areas under Turkish domination in northern Syria stemmed from a significant shift in the Turkish strategy concerning the war in Syria starting in 2016. After Russia and Iran significantly increased support for the frail Assad regime in 2015, the Syrian opposition

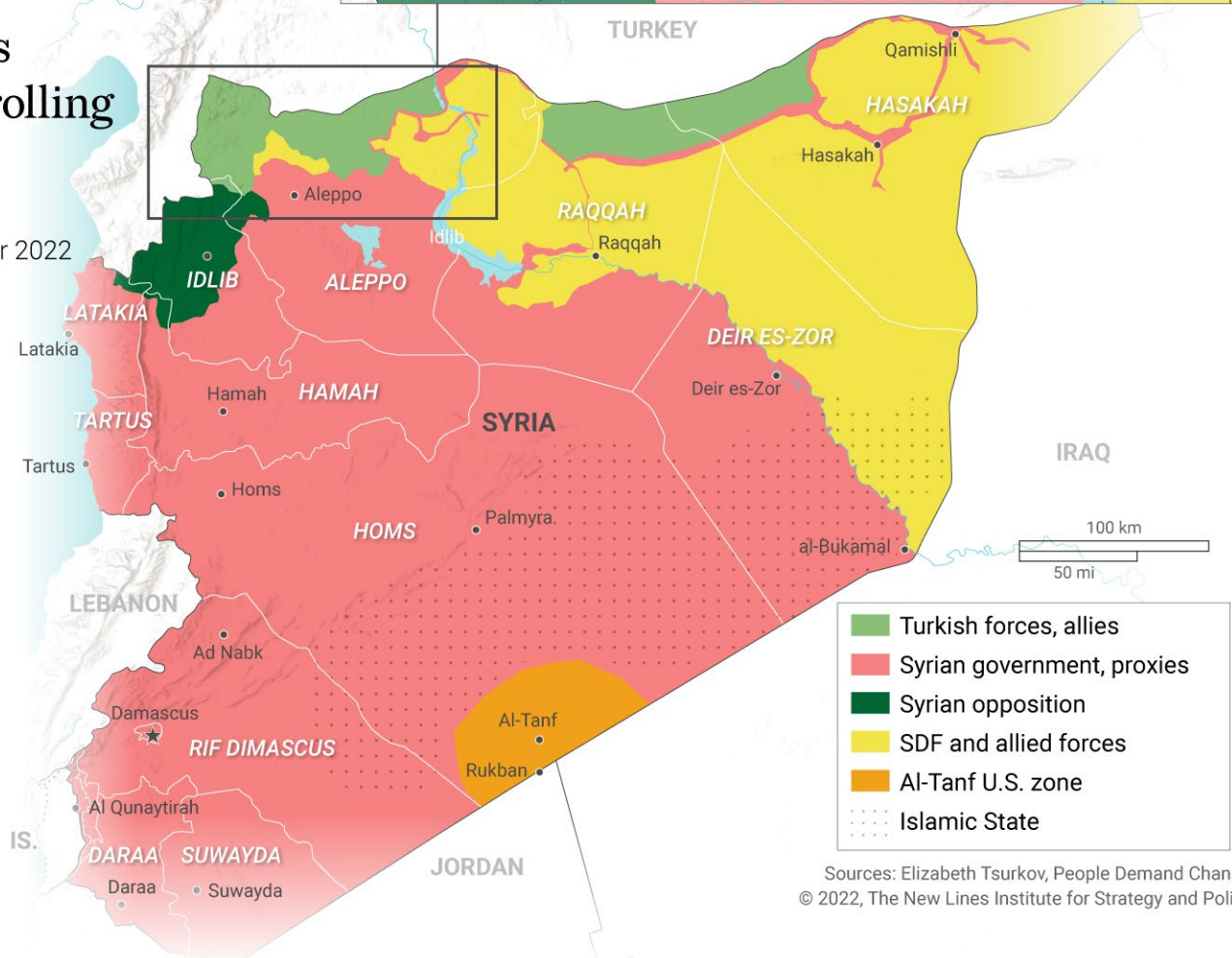
began losing ground.<sup>6</sup> Ankara gave up on attempting to topple the Assad regime and prioritized securing its border and countering the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG). The YPG is part of the global Öcalanist movement, whose dominant Turkish branch, the PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party), has waged an insurgency against Turkey since the 1980s.<sup>7</sup>

In 2014, the United States began providing military support to the YPG to capture areas controlled by ISIS. With U.S. prompting, in 2015 the YPG established the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), an umbrella group that includes Arab fighters, but is dominated by the Kurdish YPG.<sup>8</sup> After the SDF began capturing Arab-majority regions from ISIS, Turkey launched the first



## Who's Controlling Syria

As of November 2022



Sources: Elizabeth Tsurkov, People Demand Change  
© 2022, The New Lines Institute for Strategy and Policy



---

**“ When Turkey first created the umbrella body that would become the SNA, it lured Islamist, Free Syrian Army fighters, civilians, and even refugees in Turkey with high salaries of about \$200 monthly. ”**

---

offensive in August 2016 utilizing what would become the SNA. The operation, named “Euphrates Shield,” captured areas along the Turkish border that were under ISIS control, but the operation was prompted by the Turkish desire to block an ongoing effort of the SDF to link the territories under their control between Manbij and Afrîn. The second offensive, “Olive Branch,” launched in January 2018, involved capturing Afrîn from the YPG. In late 2019, Turkey launched the third offensive, unironically named “Peace Spring,” on the areas between the towns of Tel Abyad in Raqqa province and Ras al-Ayn in Hasakah province, previously controlled by the SDF.

The 2018 offensive of Afrîn and the 2019 operation in areas adjacent to Ras al-Ayn involved the mass flight of civilians.<sup>9</sup> Most of Afrîn’s original inhabitants fled the area due to heavy airstrikes and have since been prevented from returning to their homes by both the YPG and the SNA.<sup>10</sup> During the 2019 offensive, towns and villages with a larger share of the population who were non-Arabs, such as Kurds and Yazidis, experienced mass displacement as well.<sup>11</sup> SNA factions now controlling these areas threatened, detained, and tortured Kurds who attempted to return and reclaim their property.<sup>12</sup>

While the SNA depopulated parts of northern Syria of their Kurdish inhabitants, the Assad regime’s offensives on rebel-held pockets farther south displaced Arabs to the rebel-held north. The YPG’s attack on the northern environs of Aleppo when the city was besieged by regime forces in 2016 led to the displacement of thousands from towns such as Tel Rif’at, which is still under joint regime-YPG control. The Arabs displaced from farther south repopulated the towns and villages emptied of Kurds and Yazidis along the Turkish border. Others crowded into sprawling displacement camps in areas under SNA control as well as Idlib, under the control of the Islamist group Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS). Very few IDPs moved to the areas occupied in the 2019 offensive, but Afrîn’s demographics were deeply altered. A 2020 estimate of this once majority-Kurdish area showed that the district was home to 154,682 residents, (overwhelmingly Kurds), and 285,550 displaced persons, who are overwhelmingly Arab.<sup>13</sup>

## **The SNA**

The SNA plays an outsized role in the daily affairs of areas under its control, impacting everything from the security situation to real estate sales, business dealings, the work of NGOs, and local governance institutions. Hence, much of this

report focuses on the conduct of the force in areas it dominates.

## **Formal and Actual Structure**

Formally, the SNA answers to the Syrian Interim Government’s Ministry of Defense, headed by Hassan Hamade.<sup>14</sup> In reality, the interim government and Ministry of Defense do not exercise control of the SNA, with all major decisions being made by Turkish intelligence.<sup>15</sup> The SNA operates out of several regional operations rooms (such as in al-Bab, Jarablus, Ras al-Ayn, Afrîn). The Turkish military and intelligence officers heading these centers coordinate the distribution of ongoing military responsibilities, make all decisions, and inform the Syrian commanders, who then carry out the orders.<sup>16</sup>

## **Remuneration**

Conversations with SNA fighters since the force’s establishment attest to the central motivation for joining the force: receiving a somewhat steady salary in a war-ravaged region where few job opportunities are available. Turkey and the commanders of the factions, aware of this dependency, have gradually reduced the salaries paid to the fighters. When Turkey first created the umbrella body that would become the SNA, it lured Islamists, Free Syrian Army fighters, civilians, and even refugees in





Turkey with high salaries of about \$200 monthly.<sup>17</sup> Gradually, the salaries of the fighters were decreased, until reaching 600 Turkish liras currently (less than \$30). These sums officially ought to be paid monthly, but are generally paid every 50 days, meaning SNA fighters earn about 70 cents per day. The salaries are handed over in cash to the commanders of the factions or administrative officers dispatched by them to Kilis, in southern Turkey, in the presence of a Turkish officer and a Qatari intelligence officer, according to a commander in charge of financial management within the 2nd Division.<sup>18</sup> Commanders are then free to distribute the salaries as they see fit, explaining the variance in the salaries and compensations of fighters in cases of injury.<sup>19</sup>

The alliance between Islamist-leaning Qatar and the only ruling Islamist party in the world, the Turkish AKP, has allowed Turkey to write off some of the costs associated with running a proxy force, with the tab picked up by its wealthy Gulf partner. Qatar's role in financing the SNA's salaries became evident following the infighting between two eastern Syrian factions, Division 20 and Ahrar al-Sharqiyah, over fertile lands near Ras al-Ayn. To reconcile the two factions, Qatari intelligence officials promised to increase the salaries of Ahrar al-Sharqiyah fighters to discourage the stronger faction from attacking the weaker Division 20.<sup>20</sup> In July 2021, after the Biden administration sanctioned the leadership of Ahrar al-Sharqiyah for human rights abuses, Qatar raised the

salaries of Ahrar al-Sharqiyah fighters, apparently aiming to raise the morale of the fighters and decrease Ahrar's frequent bouts of infighting with other factions over economic resources.<sup>21</sup>

The Qatari support for the factions goes beyond the financing of salaries. Qatari intelligence personnel have attended meetings and ceremonies marking the completion of training courses of some of the factions inside Syria, according to commanders who attended the events. After the SDF organized conferences of tribal representatives expressing support for the SDF, SNA commanders rushed to do the same. Qatar financed these gatherings, which entailed slaughtering hundreds of sheep to serve to the thousands of attendees, according to a commander of an eastern Syrian faction.<sup>22</sup> Finally, Qatari intelligence instructed a prominent Qatari charity operating in displacement camps in northern Syria to distribute food baskets to Ahrar al-Sharqiyah and Division 20 when it worked to reconcile between them, as a form of a financial incentive to stop fighting. The factions then distributed the baskets to their fighters.<sup>23</sup>

### Human Rights Abuses

Human rights organizations, the U.N. Commission of Inquiry, media outlets, and researchers have documented at length the human rights abuses perpetrated by the SNA, including torture, kidnappings for ransom, rape, pillaging, child recruitment, extrajudicial killings, and extortion.<sup>24</sup> Despite this extensive documentation, few

fighters and no senior commanders have been prosecuted for their offenses. The lack of accountability has gradually normalized a culture of criminality within the force. In private settings, fighters comfortably discuss with one another and even civilians their criminal ventures and exploits, and even take pride in them.<sup>25</sup> While the abuses of the SNA affect all residents of areas under their control, those living under the rule of factions that are foreign to the area are more vulnerable. In towns such as Azaz and Mare', which have remained under rebel rule since 2012, the fighters in the factions are more likely to be local and therefore more accountable to their communities.<sup>26</sup>

Civilians forced to navigate this environment of impunity have turned to factions to protect them against the abuses of other groups. Due to the failure of traditional law-and-order institutions such as the civilian and military police and the courts, residents of SNA areas have turned to factions to whom they are connected to protect their rights. For example, Syrians displaced from eastern Ghouta can turn to the support of Jaysh al-Islam or Falyaq al-Rahman, in whose ranks they are very likely to have relatives. While such problem-solving often leads to infighting between factions, it does create some deterrence against future abuses. The absence of such ties is why Kurds are particularly vulnerable to abuse. In addition to being ruled by factions foreign to Afrin, they lack a local force to whom they can turn for protection.







Thousands of displaced people from Afrîn line up to receive bread in the village of Fafin, south of Tal Rafat in March 2018. The refugees fled the fighting from a Turkish military campaign. The area is littered with mines and IEDs from the conflict. (Afshin Ismaeli / SOPA Images/LightRocket via Getty Images)

Turkey – which initially intervened in the war to help topple the Assad regime, which is notorious for its torture dungeons and corruption – helped create a new criminal authoritarian structure that mirrors some of the regime's worst practices. All the factions operate not only regular prisons but also black sites, where detainees are extrajudicially held. Torture is rampant in both types of facilities, including women and children.<sup>27</sup> While human rights monitors have documented

abuses by every armed actor in Syria's conflict, only the regime and ISIS have been accused of systematically using rape as a weapon of war.<sup>28</sup> However, four Arab residents of Afrîn, as well as the Syria U.N. Commission of Inquiry, buttressed reports made by Kurdish outlets about the rape of Kurdish and Yazidi women by SNA fighters in Afrîn.<sup>29</sup> The rape takes place in black sites run by the various factions,<sup>30</sup> but also outside of prison walls.<sup>31</sup>

### **Turkish-Led Efforts to Reduce SNA Abuses**

The Turkish approach regarding law and order in these regions appears to focus on mitigation of abuse and attempts to minimize violence in zones over which Turkey does not have effective control. Turkey has made several attempts to curb the abuses of the factions, but all relied on their cooperation and thus failed to achieve noticeable change. On top of the general ineffectiveness of the mechanisms for addressing



grievances, complainants often receive death threats from the accused factions, and thus many locals avoid reporting problems.

Turkey established a civilian police force in March 2017 that was intended to bring about the removal of the factions from population centers.<sup>32</sup> However, due to the illicit profits the factions accrue from being present in cities (such as running protection rackets), the factions have refused to retreat to barracks outside of cities.<sup>33</sup> In February 2018, Turkey began deploying the SNA's military police, intended to curtail the abuses of the factions.<sup>34</sup> However, the MP is unable to serve as a counterbalance to the factions for several reasons. First, the MP is drawn from members of the factions themselves, with the identity of commanders within the MP affecting the composition and affiliation of the force locally.<sup>35</sup> Thus, the MP gets drawn into conflicts between the factions, and at times serves as a force multiplier for specific factions in their internal battles.<sup>36</sup> Second, the MP is significantly weaker militarily compared to the factions and is unable to enforce its decisions if the factions object.

Turkish demands for the arrest of individuals are generally met with much greater adherence, but not always.<sup>37</sup> Even when the misconduct affects Turkish interests directly, there is sometimes no accountability. For example, in late 2020, the commander of a sub-faction within an eastern Syrian group who also moonlights as smuggler into Turkey, opened fire on an

armored Turkish vehicle after the Turkish border police stopped his smuggling attempt near Tel Abyad. The border police demanded that the MP arrest the man, but he remains free as of the writing of the report, a year later.<sup>38</sup>

In 2020, a month following the issuance of a scathing U.N. Commission of Inquiry report on the abuses of the SNA,<sup>39</sup> Turkish intelligence compelled six factions that play a significant role in Afrîn to establish the Restitution of Rights Committee.<sup>40</sup> The Committee claims that in the span of the first six months, it received 826 complaints and solved 59 percent of them.<sup>41</sup> This success, however limited, can be credited solely to Turkish pressure. Hachem, a member of the Committee, said in a bemused tone: "Have you ever seen a thief spontaneously return what he has stolen? No way. And factions have returned some of what they've taken by force. This was due to the Turkish role."<sup>42</sup>

In the span of a few months, however, the Committee essentially stopped functioning after factions pulled out of it. The social media accounts of the Committee keep publishing content, likely to give the impression that it is still operational, but no work has been conducted since early 2021.<sup>43</sup> Senior Turkish officials are aware of the Committee's dysfunction and have brought up the issue of restarting its work, but as of the writing of the report, it remains inactive.<sup>44</sup>

## Crime and Punishment

At first glance, the conduct of the SNA may appear anarchic and out

of control, but there is a logic, a structure, and even an element of discipline to this behavior, which is largely permitted and even encouraged by commanders. While the abuses of SNA members toward civilians largely go unpunished, the factions do maintain discipline within their ranks on issues that matter to the commanders. Commanders order their fighters to commit certain crimes, such as looting, smuggling, extorting "taxes," and kidnapping civilians for ransom. Commanders also turn a blind eye to other abuses such as child recruitment, small-scale looting, and robberies.

However, fighters and commanders are punished for arguing with or talking back to commanders, disobeying orders, missing shifts, engaging in homosexual relations, following Telegram channels or "liking" Facebook groups that share content critical of the faction or its commander, publishing on social media content critical of the faction or commander, neglecting guard duty, and violating military dress code.<sup>45</sup> Fighters and commanders also are punished for engaging in profiteering without the authorization of the faction solely for their own benefit.<sup>46</sup>

SNA commanders also have cracked down on leaks and private criticisms of the faction or its commander. Abu Ayman, an Amshat commander who deployed to Libya, described the common practice of searching their phones. "At times, the senior leadership would call us into the yard and start going through our phones. They would open WhatsApp and search for words like Abu Amsha and







A family cleans up damaged farmland in the eastern village of Baghouz in March 2020, a year after the fall of the Islamic State. (Delil Souleiman / AFP via Getty Images)

“pimps” [*arsat*, a common expletive used to describe the factions],” Abu Ayman recalled.<sup>47</sup> Phones of fighters are occasionally searched in Syria too, particularly WhatsApp conversations and to which Telegram channels the fighters subscribe; following the anti-SNA “Nightmare” channels, for example, is a punishable offense.<sup>48</sup>

Commanders use various sanctions in cases of punishable offenses, ranging from shaving the hair of the fighter to humiliate him, not paying the member his salary, detention for up to a month, whipping on the soles of the feet (*falqa*), flogging, hanging by the wrists (*shabeh*), being stuffed in a car tire (*dulab*),<sup>49</sup> and expulsion from the faction (which at times also means losing one’s home, if the fighter was living in a house stolen by the faction). Punishments were especially severe surrounding

the deployment as mercenaries in Libya and Azerbaijan. In Libya, SNA members who refused to fight or staged protests due to non-payment of salaries were detained, deported back to Syria, not paid their wages, and kicked out of the faction. Some were even shot and injured by their commanders in Libya or detained and tortured.<sup>50</sup>

Owing to these severe punishments, and the lack of alternative sources of employment, fighters largely abide by the rules governing their behavior. Behaviors not permissible by commanders are rare. Amin, a fighter with Jaysh al-Islam described it thus: “The Jaysh is well-established, so there are no guys left who are not with the program of the faction. You find a great deal of obedience, and especially when fighting against other factions or whatever [is ordered].”<sup>51</sup>

## Popular perceptions of the SNA

The SNA’s reputation among Syrians is dreadful, and members of the force are well aware of it. Commanders of the SNA have attempted to improve the force’s image but have not worked to alter the conduct of the force that has been so damaging to the SNA’s brand. Conversations with Syrians residing under the control of the SNA and beyond indicate that the fighters are despised and perceived as Turkey’s mercenaries. The negative image stems from the abuses perpetrated by the fighters against civilians, their role in perpetuating the lawlessness of areas under their control, and their fight to advance Turkish interests rather than fighting the regime. Their reputation for engaging in looting leads Arab residents of areas under SDF control to largely prefer remaining under SDF rule,



in which power is concentrated in Kurdish hands,<sup>52</sup> rather than fall victim to the SNA.<sup>53</sup>

The disdain toward the force is so widespread that it is one of the few topics in which Syrians are in agreement. Recounting tales of abuse and offering one's opinions about the SNA has become a sort of social lubricant in conversations among Syrian refugees opposed to the Assad regime who are not closely familiar with each other. People familiar with the subject know that this position won't arouse disagreement.<sup>54</sup>

Efforts by commanders to bolster the SNA's reputation are concentrated in the online sphere due to the ubiquity of smartphones among Syrians. Factions have produced propaganda videos and songs attempting to link the force to the Syrian revolution and its goals. SNA commanders also established their own electronic media pages and channels in an attempt to bolster their reputation, such as the Zeitoun Agency (linked to the Hamza Division), Syria Plus, Shamina, Syria 1 (linked to the Amshat division), al-Khabur and Nina Press (linked to Ahrar al-Sharqiyah).<sup>55</sup>

Despite these efforts, Syrian public opinion and online discussions remain overwhelmingly negative. Telegram channels under the name of "Nightmare of [town under SNA control or faction]" have gained tens of thousands of subscribers owing to their consistent exposure of SNA abuses. To improve their image, SNA factions have created "electronic armies" that swamp

Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter comments sections with praise for the faction and its leader and file false reports to the automated Facebook and Twitter systems, aiming to take down critical accounts. Such efforts have been successful, particularly on Twitter.<sup>56</sup> Some of the members of the electronic armies are active fighters in the factions, who are ordered through WhatsApp groups and Twitter direct message rooms to report certain accounts or leave certain comments. Other members are fighters who have become disabled in battle and continue to receive monthly salaries from their factions by creating multiple accounts to become part of these electronic armies.<sup>57</sup>

## Security situation

While security in SNA-controlled areas has improved overall compared to the early days of the SNA's establishment, criminality and political violence continue to affect these areas, making return of refugees less likely. A YPG cutout militia routinely carries out cross-line attacks involving rocket fire, infiltrations, sniper fire and anti-tank missile guided strikes from areas under YPG control inside SNA territories.<sup>58</sup> Additionally, the area suffers from recurring explosions of improvised explosive devices (IEDs) placed by various actors. Finally, frequent episodes of infighting between the factions have led to numerous civilian deaths and injuries.

A major security challenge in SNA-controlled areas are bombing attacks, mostly carried out by

networks loyal to the PKK within the ranks of the YPG.<sup>59</sup> The attacks have resulted in hundreds of casualties, many of them civilians.<sup>60</sup> Some of the IEDs are brought into SNA-controlled areas through smuggling routes overseen by the SNA without its knowledge, or in hidden compartments. However, another method is through recruitment of SNA fighters, commanders, and police personnel by the SDF in exchange for money.<sup>61</sup> "There isn't a single armed faction that is not infiltrated by the SDF," insisted Salah, the SNA Military Police officer. Speaking in January 2021, he said, "A few days ago, we arrested two men in Rajo who planted IEDs in the streets of the town who belong to the Hamzat [Hamza Division]. There are dozens of cases of SNA members who've been caught in planting IEDs," he reported. Fighters at checkpoints are also paid to let in vehicles from SDF areas without inspecting them.<sup>62</sup>

"The motive for collaboration with the SDF is always money," said Salah, the SNA Military Police officer.<sup>63</sup> Fehman, a YPG intelligence member who recruits collaborators in the ranks of the SNA to foil their attempted bombings in SDF areas, said, "They are mercenaries, plain and simple. I mean, they go and fight in Libya and Azerbaijan for \$1,000 and expose themselves to danger for money. Do you see a person like that not being willing to leak information for money?"<sup>64</sup> Indeed, in conversations with Fehman he often displayed knowledge about developments in SNA areas that have not been reported publicly.<sup>65</sup>







# Timeline of Turkey–Syria Actions

**Aug. 24, 2016:** Turkey, along with allied factions, launches Operation Euphrates Shield to clear areas along the Turkish border from ISIS control as well as to target Kurdish groups in the region.

**Dec. 30, 2017:** The Free Syrian Army (SNA) is formed from the Turkey-backed factions.

**Jan. 20, 2018:** Turkey and the SNA launch Operation Olive Branch against ISIS and Kurdish groups in the Kurdish-held Afrîn district.

**Oct. 9, 2019:** Turkey launches Operation Peace Spring with the SNA against Kurdish fighters in northern Hasakah and Raqqah provinces.

**Jan. 5, 2020:** Turkey deploys the SNA to Libya to support the UN-recognized Government of National Accord.

**Sept. 28, 2020:** Turkey deploys SNA fighters to Azerbaijan to support local allies during the brief Nagorno-Karabakh War.

**June 18, 2022:** Hayat Tahrir al-Sham begins expansion into northern Aleppo.



Turkish tanks move through Jarabulus, Syria during Operation Euphrates Shield in August 2016. (Firas Faham / Anadolu Agency via Getty Images)



Smoke rises after a Turkish bombardment of Kurdish forces in the Syrian town of Ras al-Ain along the Turkish border in October 2019 during Operation Peace Spring. (Delil Souleiman / AFP via Getty Images)

Sources: Reuters, The Guardian, Al-Monitor, Daily Sabah, Al Jazeera

© 2022 The New Lines Institute for Strategy and Policy

## Infighting

Another major source of insecurity in SNA-controlled zones is infighting between the factions. No other region in Syria currently, or in the history of the conflict, has witnessed such frequent episodes of infighting. The clashes usually take place in residential

areas, given the deployment patterns of the factions, and often result in the injury and death of unlucky bystanders. The infighting is overwhelmingly driven by competition over resources and profit-generating schemes, such as control of checkpoints where the factions extort taxes,<sup>66</sup> control over smuggling routes into areas

held by the regime, Iranian-backed militias, the SDF, and across the border into Turkey;<sup>67</sup> possession of looted property such as civilian homes in Afrîn;<sup>68</sup> the content of looted homes in Libya;<sup>69</sup> stores of ammunition and weaponry captured from the SDF;<sup>70</sup> olive groves in Afrîn;<sup>71</sup> and wheat fields near Ras al-Ayn.<sup>72</sup> Additional causes







of the infighting are score-settling due to prior rounds of conflict<sup>73</sup> and petty arguments that escalate into exchanges of fire.<sup>74</sup>

Under pressure from Turkey, the factions established several committees over the years to solve disputes, and in 2021 they adopted a Revolutionary Code of Honor,<sup>75</sup> but those efforts have largely failed, as they obligate the factions to police their own behavior. Direct Turkish intervention has proven much more effective.<sup>76</sup> For example, in May 2020 after Turkish intelligence officials threatened the commanders of Division 20 and Ahrar al-Sharqiyah to end their constant infighting or else the salaries of their fighters would be cut off, the commanders of the factions rushed to meet and reconcile.<sup>77</sup>

## Local Governance

### A Powerless Interim Government

The governance system set up in areas under SNA control is dominated by Turkish bureaucrats who hold decision-making power and oversee the work of Syrians. While it does not appear that the Turkish leadership has made a decision on whether to annex the areas under SNA control, the heavy involvement of Turkish bureaucrats, the trade ties, employment of a large number of Syrian public servants, and provision of services from Turkey are all facilitating the gradual integration of these regions into the Turkish polity.

A major sign of this integration is the linking of biometric IDs issued

by Syrian local councils in SNA areas to the Turkish national ID system. The linking of the two systems allows authorities in Turkey to detain those wanted by Turkey who have crossed its border. It also allows Turkey to prevent public sector employees receiving salaries from Turkey and residing in northern Syria from illegally collecting their salary after moving to Turkey.<sup>78</sup>

Formally, the areas under SNA control are governed by the Syrian Interim Government (SIG), the governance body representing the internationally recognized Syrian opposition, and its various ministries. In reality, the SIG plays a largely symbolic role.<sup>79</sup> For example, during a June 2022 incursion of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham into Afrin, the SIG ordered the SNA to fight back, but nearly all factions adopted a position of neutrality.<sup>80</sup> The SIG's authority and influence is significantly undermined by its lack of control over appointments, resources, and decision making. Turkish governors' offices across the border appoint and pay the salaries of judges, policemen, teachers, preachers, and doctors working for the SIG's ministries of justice, interior, education, religious endowments and health.<sup>81</sup> Turkish local governance authorities built and refurbished schools, hospitals, and police stations without the SIG's involvement.<sup>82</sup>

### Local Councils

In line with the decentralized Turkish model of governance, local councils play a significant role in the running of local affairs. Each of the areas under SNA control is

linked to the Turkish governor's (wali's) office across the border. Thus, the Hatay wali oversees the Afrin local council, the Kilis and Gaziantep walis oversee the work of councils in the "Euphrates Shield" areas, and the Şanlıurfa wali is responsible for the areas between Tel Abyad and Ras al-Ayn.<sup>83</sup> Each wali's office appointed its representative to the local councils, who are colloquially known as the "Turkish governor," due to their domination of decision-making.<sup>84</sup>

The Turkish walis and the Turkish advisers they deploy to the offices of the local councils, schools, hospitals, police stations, and other institutions play the decision-making role on issues ranging from approving transfers of teachers, timing of school exams, and concluding deals with Turkish companies for the supply of services such as electricity.<sup>85</sup> Representatives of several Turkish ministries — including transportation, youth and sports, education, energy, and trade — are stationed across SNA areas and play a dominant decision-making role.<sup>86</sup>

The dominance of the factions over civilian and economic life in areas under their control further undermines the local councils. They have been unable to enforce their decisions, such as halting trade with SDF areas. Hadi, an employee of the al-Bab Local Council, described the balance of power: "The hegemony of the factions and their ongoing interference in our work really weakens the local councils. They constantly threaten us and the civilian police."<sup>87</sup>





Workers and rebel fighters stand outside a PTT office — Turkey’s state-owned postal service — in Azaz, Aleppo province, on Oct. 16, 2018. (Nazeer Al-Khatib / AFP via Getty Images)

## Service Provision

Owing to significant involvement of the Turkish wali offices, in some respects services in northern Aleppo are significantly better than in other parts of Syria, especially when it comes to electricity provision (but not usage, due to its high cost).<sup>88</sup> Turkey and NGOs have built and refurbished hospitals and schools, but those institutions suffer from significant staffing shortages.<sup>89</sup> However, due to widespread poverty and poor quality of teachers, SNA

areas have the highest rate of school non-attendance.<sup>90</sup> On the other hand, Turkey’s recognition of high-school diplomas granted in SNA regions increased the motivation of students, as it allowed them to attend universities in Turkey.<sup>91</sup> The establishment of branches of Turkish universities in northern Aleppo provided, for the first time, an opportunity to Syrians living outside of regime control to attain internationally recognizable higher education degrees inside the country.<sup>92</sup>

## Economy

### A Highly Unequal Society

Similar to other regions of Syria, after 10 years of war most of the population residing under SNA rule is struggling to afford the most basic necessities. According to a 2021 U.N. estimate, 93 percent of the region’s residents are living in extreme poverty.<sup>93</sup> According to a March 2021 estimate by REACH, it would take 64 days of earnings of an average day laborer in northwest Syria to cover a monthly





survival minimum expenditure basket, a U.N. poverty measure.<sup>94</sup> Most residents of SNA regions are unemployed,<sup>95</sup> and the population is highly dependent on aid, accumulating debt and remittances from refugees living abroad to be able to meet their basic needs.<sup>96</sup> The war and depreciation of the Syrian lira significantly exacerbated inequality across Syria. The 400,000 displaced persons residing in these regions are particularly vulnerable after being disconnected from their agricultural lands or other sources of livelihood, such as small businesses.<sup>97</sup> Even those steadily employed who once formed the middle class, mostly public sector employees and small business owners, have been pushed into poverty.<sup>98</sup> At the same time, a small group of well-connected military members, and business elites linked to them, have been able to profit immensely throughout the war.

The areas controlled by the SNA in northern Aleppo and northeast Syria suffered from decades of neglect by the Assad regime, and the economy remained largely based on agriculture, with many youth migrating to cities, particularly Aleppo, for work.<sup>99</sup> The territories under SNA control fell out of regime control in 2012, and much of the region's economic infrastructure—such as irrigation systems, oil and soap production facilities, shops and factories—were destroyed or looted throughout the war.<sup>100</sup> The major sectors of employment in these regions are the public sector (teachers, policemen, doctors, administrators), agriculture, livestock herding, construction, small-scale

manufacturing, and trade. About 20 percent of the region's employed rely on irregular daily wages.<sup>101</sup>

The economy of the region has been gradually integrating into the Turkish economy. In late 2017, Turkey opened the first two branches of the Turkish Post (PTT) in northern Aleppo, and since then, it has established 11 branches in total.<sup>102</sup> Salaries to civil servants are paid through the PTT. Following the rapid depreciation of the Syrian lira, in June areas under SNA control and later Idlib switched to using the Turkish lira for most transactions.<sup>103</sup> Turkey also operates five formal border crossings, located in Tel Abyad, Jarablus, al-Rai, Azaz and Jindires.<sup>104</sup>

### **A Dominant War Economy**

After 10 years of conflict, Syria's entire economy has been reconfigured, with previous economic elites fleeing the country and new figures emerging, all with links to local armed actors or members of armed groups.<sup>105</sup> Northern Aleppo is no different, with the commanders of factions and those with close ties to them dominating the economy. War economies are characterized by prioritization of short-term profit at the expense of long-term investments.<sup>106</sup> Due to the monopolization of major profit-generating ventures by armed actors and those close to them, investors are deterred from investing in war economies.<sup>107</sup>

The economic activities of the factions are managed out of specific economic affairs offices to which commanders of the factions

appoint their relatives or other particularly trusted individuals.<sup>108</sup> For example, the economic affairs office of Jaysh al-Islam is run by Abu Jihad al-Buwaydhani, a relative of Essam al-Buwaydhani, the commander of the faction; in Ahrar al-Sharqiyah, Abu Jaafar Shaqra, the cousin of the commander of the faction, is the head of the economic office; in the Amshat faction, Sayf al-Jassem, the brother of Muhammad Jassem (Abu Amsha) plays the same role.<sup>109</sup>

### **Smuggling and Arbitrage**

Northern Aleppo sits at a crossroad of multiple trade and smuggling routes. It is a connecting hub between Turkey and the rest of Syria, from which goods are exported and then traded to SDF and regime areas.<sup>110</sup> Goods passing from SDF areas, particularly oil products, must pass through northern Aleppo to reach the larger market in Idlib (home to 3 million people). The entry of people being smuggled from regime areas who wish to reach Turkey also occurs mostly through SNA areas, rather than Idlib, due to the higher degree of militarization of the Idlib frontlines, where Hayat Tahrir al-Sham and regime forces continue to trade fire.<sup>111</sup> Human smuggling from SDF areas into Turkey also largely occurs through the SNA-controlled stretch of the border between Ras al-Ayn and Tel Abyad.<sup>112</sup> High-ranking SNA commanders are involved in the smuggling of refugees into Turkey<sup>113</sup> despite repeated Turkish demands from the faction commanders that they halt this practice.<sup>114</sup>







---

**“ The looting [during SNA operations] was particularly extensive during the invasion of Afrîn due to the displacement of most of the inhabitants of the region. The movable property, such as cellphones, electrical appliances, cars, factory machines and generators were sold off or kept by members of the factions. ”**

---

The factions benefit from the advantageous location of the territories under their control to profit due to differences in prices between Turkey, SDF areas, regime areas, and northwest Syria. Diesel, gold, dollars, sugar, cooking oil, cellphones, cars, and sheep are smuggled on an ongoing basis.<sup>115</sup> The factions specialize in smuggling of certain types of goods, tapping into specific networks of traders and clients. The Hamza Division, for example, specializes in smuggling diesel and sheep, while the Levant Front maintains a near-monopoly on the smuggling and trade in dollars, gold, and cellphones. The Amshat faction is heavily involved in smuggling drugs, mostly hashish and captagon. The Sultan Murad Division and Levant Front, in control of smuggling points south of al-Bab, dominate the market of smuggling cars imported from Turkey to regime-held areas.<sup>116</sup> Certain types of smuggling are controlled solely by the factions and traders who work for them, such as the trade in cars. The traders do not pay “taxes” to the factions, since they partner with them. Instead, they hand them a share of the profits. Other goods, such as foodstuffs, can be traded

by independent traders who pay “taxes” for the smuggling.<sup>117</sup>

Factions that were displaced to the region in 2018, such as Faylaq al-Rahman, Jaysh al-Islam, and Division 20, are less involved in smuggling due to unfamiliarity with the existing networks of traders in the region, challenges of breaking into the smuggling market managed by the cartel of pre-existing factions, and inability to gain physical control over smuggling routes.<sup>118</sup>

Similar to most other armed groups in Syria, commanders and fighters within the force are engaged in the drug trade.<sup>119</sup> Drugs, particularly captagon pills manufactured in Syrian regime areas or Lebanon, cross through SNA areas into Turkey, from which the pills are shipped to Arab Gulf states.<sup>120</sup> Drugs are also traded in and out of SDF areas.<sup>121</sup> Drug use is incredibly common in the ranks of the SNA, with fighters assessing that most of their comrades are consuming them at varying frequencies.<sup>122</sup> SNA fighters have robbed drugstores in areas under their control to procure the addictive pills.<sup>123</sup> SNA members who have gone on to fight in Libya were high much of their time on and off duty.<sup>124</sup> SNA commanders

also have smuggled drugs from Libya to Syria, due to their lower price in Libya.<sup>125</sup>

### **Protection Rackets**

The SNA’s factions extort money or shares of proceeds from business owners, farmers and traders operating across areas under their control. Two main types of protection rackets dominate SNA areas: protection of specific shops, factories, restaurants, and farms and protection of trucks carrying goods (known as “tarfiq”) from attacks or harassment by other factions.<sup>126</sup> The factions compel business owners to pay protection money using threats and harassment, and<sup>127</sup> the threats are not empty ones. For example, the Levant Front killed two vegetable vendors in Afrîn city after they refused to pay protection fees to the faction, while other Afrîn business owners who refused to pay were kidnapped and tortured by Sultan Murad and Ahrar al-Sharqiyah, among other factions.<sup>128</sup>

Impoverished farmers have to pay protection fees too. The area of Afrîn is divided into sections, each under the control of a different faction that extracts “tree





SNA members raise a Syrian National Army flag in Tal Abyad during Operation Peace Spring, the Turkish-led offensive into northern Syria in October 2019. (Anadolu Agency via Getty Images)

protection fees,” and other forms of illegal taxes.<sup>129</sup> It is not merely Kurdish farmers who are subject to this extortion: Ahrar al-Sharqiyyah demands that landowners and owners of harvesting machines in the so-called Peace Spring areas each pay 7 percent of their profits to the faction, or they will be barred from working on their lands.<sup>130</sup> The Hamza Division and Levant Front, which control checkpoints in the area, force farmers to pay exorbitant fees if they wish to export their grain to Turkey.<sup>131</sup>

The protection fees do help protect the business owners’ property rights in an environment characterized by high levels of uncertainty. Ziad, who trades mostly in vegetables and fruits he imports to northern Syria from Turkey, had a shop owner refuse to pay him for the goods he sold to him. The faction protecting him, Sultan Murad, kidnapped the son of the shop owner, who then quickly paid up. A friend of Ziad’s, a trader from Deir Ez-Zor, lost \$50,000 after a shop owner refused to pay him for vegetables and fruit sold

to him because he did not buy similar protection.<sup>132</sup>

### Profiting from Dispossession

The three major military operations that expanded the territory under SNA control were accompanied by widespread looting of movable and immovable property. The looting was particularly extensive during the invasion of Afrin due to the displacement of most of the inhabitants of the region. The movable property, such as cellphones, electrical appliances,





cars, factory machines and generators were sold off or kept by members of the factions.<sup>133</sup> Some goods, such as car parts, metric tons of wheat, and tanks of olive oil, were sold off in Turkey<sup>134</sup> and to the Assad regime (through the warlord Qaterji).<sup>135</sup>

Immovable property such as farms, olive mills, orchards, water springs, homes, and businesses proved a much more sustainable source of revenue for the factions. The factions threatened, kidnapped, and even killed Kurdish and Arab owners of these properties who have attempted to reclaim them.<sup>136</sup> The homes stolen by the factions, with the official pretext of them belonging to families aligned with ISIS (in al-Bab), the Assad regime, or the SDF, are a major source of monthly income for the SNA's commanders.<sup>137</sup> Some of the homes were distributed for free to fighters in the factions.<sup>138</sup> Many of the homes are being rented to displaced persons by commanders within the factions and individual fighters or through real estate companies cooperating with the factions.<sup>139</sup>

Even those who remain in their homes are extorted. Residents of Afrîn as well as the areas captured by the SNA in 2019 in northeast Syria have had to pay monthly "rent" or one-time sums to be able to regain access to their property or continue living in it.<sup>140</sup> For example, the Amshat faction collects "rent" from people living in their homes, passed from one generation to another, in Şiyê.<sup>141</sup> Those who refuse are evicted.<sup>142</sup> The factions also took over agricultural land such as wheat and barley fields and

olive groves. Entire Kurdish villages, such as Upper Şêxorz and Middle Şêxorz, have been depopulated and their population prevented from returning, likely due to the village's rich olive groves, now managed by Jaysh al-Nukhba and Suqqur al-Shimmal factions of the SNA.<sup>143</sup> In some cases, the factions take over the agricultural work and production, while in other cases they allow farmers to work on their land in exchange for a hefty tax.<sup>144</sup>

## Business Empires

The commanders of the factions amassed immense wealth through the war economy and are seeking to invest those funds to generate further revenue and launder their money.<sup>145</sup> In an environment in which property rights can be easily violated by SNA factions, the factions themselves have an advantage, knowing that they can resort to the force of arms to defend what they consider theirs. Thus, all SNA factions have set up businesses and investments, in both SNA areas and Turkey.

The commanders of the factions rarely deposit money in banks. Instead, they invest the cash in businesses such as shops,<sup>146</sup> restaurants,<sup>147</sup> import-export ventures from Turkey, car washes and gas stations.<sup>148</sup> The startup capital required for some of the businesses runs in the hundreds of thousands of dollars, paid out in full without reliance on loans.<sup>149</sup> Even commanders of factions displaced to the north during 2018 were able to bring their capital with them and tap into existing networks of financiers living in Gulf countries.<sup>150</sup> For example, Jaysh al-Islam

established multiple businesses with those funds: car wash and maintenance shops; import of cars and motorcycles from China via Turkey; import of goods from China and Turkey; supermarkets; food stores; shops to buy and fix phones and computers; and restaurants.<sup>151</sup>

The commanders also purchase gold, which they liquidate when needed. Firas, a gold trader based in Turkey working with the factions, reported, "In 2018, I bought a number of gold alloys worth about \$32,000, and I sold it for [a commander of a faction] in 2020 for \$62,040 exactly. He sold the gold because he wanted to open a car dealership in Urfa [southern Turkey]. The general idea is to make sure your money works for you and not put it in a bank."<sup>152</sup>

A venture run by multiple factions either directly or indirectly<sup>153</sup> through traders working for them are highly polluting<sup>154</sup> makeshift refineries that are fed crude oil smuggled or traded from SDF areas.<sup>155</sup> Next to the refineries, which rely on burning the oil to extract low-quality refined benzene, kerosene, diesel and charcoal from it, businessmen close to the factions set up large cooling pools for the final products.<sup>156</sup> Employees in these facilities are mostly residents of displacement camps who earn a monthly wage of \$50 to \$100.<sup>157</sup> The work is highly damaging to their health due to exposure to toxic fumes for prolonged periods.<sup>158</sup>

Another source of revenue for the factions are money transfer offices ("hawala"), currency exchanges, and gold shops. Firas said, "All factions







An SNA soldier fires heavy machine guns and equipment to repel members of PKK, listed as a terrorist organization by Turkey, U.S. and EU, and the YPG, which Turkey regards as a terrorist group, in Tal Rifat, Syria on July 25, 2022. (Huseyin Nasir / Anadolu Agency via Getty Images)

now run cash transfer offices because they have significant start-up capital and they don't trust putting the money in the bank.<sup>159</sup>

The businesses the factions run also serve as a form of patronage and an additional benefit granted to rank-and-file members of the factions, with commanders employing the fighters in the businesses for an additional wage on top of their salary that is provided by Turkey. Thus, fighters with the Amshat faction work at supermarkets and gas stations around Şîyê for a daily wage when they are off guard duty.<sup>160</sup> Meanwhile, fighters from

the Ahrar al-Sharqiyah, Division 20, Sultan Murad Division, and the Hamza Division work sowing and harvesting wheat in lands stolen by the factions between Ras al-Ayn and Tel Abyad.<sup>161</sup> Zaher, a senior commander with Jaysh al-Islam, stated that the multiple shops, restaurants, and other businesses run by his faction are all headed by commanders who then employ their fighters, as well as the relatives of commanders and their friends. "This ensures Jaysh al-Islam will not break up because everyone benefits, and hiring is based on loyalty to the commander."<sup>162</sup>

## Relations with HTS

Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, which evolved from Jabhat al-Nusra, the al Qaeda branch in Syria, gradually came to dominate rebel-held Idlib and Western Aleppo, by destroying, displacing and absorbing rival factions. Many of the former rebels displaced by HTS from the Idlib region are now members of the SNA factions. Although the front line between the regime and HTS in Idlib has not changed since March 2020, owing to Turkey's direct military intervention in Idlib to halt the regime offensive, Russia and the regime continue to bomb and





shell Idlib, while they only do so extremely rarely in SNA areas.

In early 2022, HTS offered the Levant Front, a major SNA faction many of whose fighters are locals to northern Aleppo, to unite the administration of Idlib and SNA-held areas. HTS was likely driven by the desire to exercise greater influence over SNA areas and partake in the multiple profit-generating schemes operating in SNA areas. After several negotiation rounds, the Levant Front rejected the offer due to desire to maintain its hold over northern Aleppo, in addition to fears of being affiliated with HTS, which has been designated as a terrorist group by the United States, the UN and Turkey.<sup>163</sup> According to commanders within these factions, after the failure of the negotiations with the Levant Front, HTS signed a secret pact with the Hamzat Division (Hamzat) and Amshat factions, under which they would come to each other's help in case of an attack on any of the members.<sup>164</sup> In the spring of 2022, after a meeting between the commander of HTS, Abu Muhammad al-Jolani, with the commander of the Sultan Murad Division, Fahim Issa, in Ras al-Hosn in Idlib, the two factions signed an undeclared non-aggression agreement, under which Sultan Murad would remain neutral in any conflict involving HTS in SNA areas.<sup>165</sup>

Having laid the ground, in June 2022, HTS exploited an internal rift within the Levant Front, after a faction within the Levant Front split from it and clashes erupted between the mother organization and the sub-faction. This faction, Division 32, made up of fighters

from Raqqah, had split from Ahrar al-Sham in Idlib, moved to northern Aleppo and joined the Levant Front in 2017. Since the split, the Ahrar al-Sham contingent based in Idlib came increasingly under the sway of the predominant HTS. Utilizing the flag of Ahrar al-Sham, fighters from HTS' Talha Division stormed northern Aleppo to assist Division 23. Following clashes utilizing heavy weaponry, the two sides reached an agreement that Division 23 would regain the HQs from which it was displaced. Those HQs became the new homes for hundreds of HTS fighters and intelligence personnel who stayed behind in northern Aleppo, maintaining surveillance over rival factions.

During the June 2022 round of fighting, no faction other than Jaysh al-Islam offered support to the Levant Front against HTS, and multiple factions facilitated the movement of HTS. Jaysh al-Islam, previously based in eastern Ghouta near Damascus, fought HTS' predecessor, Jabhat al-Nusra, for dominance over that area, engendering a years-long rivalry lasting to this day.

In October 2022 clashes erupted yet again between HTS, this time backed by the Amshat and Hamzat divisions, against the Levant Front and Jaysh al-Islam. A coalition of eastern Syria factions led by Ahrar al-Sharqiya fought for one day in Jinderis, but then surrendered the town to HTS and adopted a position of neutrality, as did all other major factions. HTS utilized the fighters it kept in Afrin, and brought in additional reinforcements from the Talha and Omar divisions.

During the heavy infighting, HTS and its allies were able to take over Afrin city in its entirety. The infighting lasted for over a week, and resulted in mass displacement of civilians seeking to avoid stray bullets and shells, as well as HTS rule (particularly in the case of family members of the Levant Front and Jaysh al-Islam). When the influx of the displaced reached the border with Turkey, on October 21, the Turkish military intervened to end the infighting, fearing that additional Syrian refugees will cross into Turkey.

HTS second incursion into SNA areas resulted in major gains for the Idlib-based faction, but not an outright victory. A greater number of HTS personnel, including its intelligence apparatus and General Security Service, are now operating in Afrin and Kafr Janna under the cover of the Hamzat, Amshat and Ahrar al-Sham, targeting perceived opponents of HTS.<sup>166</sup> Most significantly, HTS took over from the Levant Front the highly profitable al-Humran Crossing connecting SNA areas to SDF areas near Manbij, through which trade in oil and other good takes place and is taxed.<sup>167</sup>

Despite the increase in HTS' influence in SNA areas during 2022, the group's future expansion into SNA areas is highly constrained by Turkey's "Red Lines" clarified to the leadership of HTS by Turkey. Those include: no future major offensives from Idlib, no public display of HTS presence, no takeover of the civilian institutions Turkey created to govern these zones, no takeover of funds generated by the local governing institutions, and no to







exhausting the manpower of the Hamzat and Amshat in factional infighting, as they are used by Turkey as mercenaries in Libya.<sup>168</sup>

## Conclusion

What has the potential to be the most stable and prosperous region in Syria, owing to its limited destruction, protection of the Turkish military, Turkish investments in its infrastructure and service provision, and central location as a trade hub between different parts of Syria, is instead one of Syria's most violent regions. These areas, which could have served as a showcase where the Syrian opposition could demonstrate a better alternative to Assad, are instead characterized by authoritarian, predatory rule. The recent sanction of one of the SNA's factions, Ahrar al-Sharqiyah, by the United States, along with Syrian regime entities, for human rights abuses, attests to the failure of the formal Syrian opposition to produce a moral alternative to Assad.<sup>169</sup>

Turkish officials working with the SNA know the abusive nature of the factions but appear to lack the resources and authority to act more forcefully. While the initial relationship between Turkey and the SNA was clearly that of patron and proxies, this gradually turned into a relationship of mutual dependency. The commanders of factions became more financially independent owing to their war-profiteering and their ability to keep enough men in their ranks despite paying them very little. Turkey sustains the factions but is also dependent on them for the protection of its front lines with



New soldiers of the Hamza Division, which is affiliated with the SNA, march at a graduation and oath ceremony in the town of Bazaa, near Aleppo in northern Syria in September 2020. (Hisam el Homsy / Anadolu Agency via Getty Images)

the SDF and as mercenaries in foreign entanglements.

At the same time, several factors are conducive to reform. The freeze of the front lines since March 2020 means no new waves of displacement are likely to destabilize the region, and the low likelihood of new offensives provides Ankara with space to focus on making the zones under its control more livable. Additionally, Turkey's control of the SNA's payroll provides it with leverage vis-à-vis faction commanders. Previously, SNA commanders cut off from Turkish support, such as

Abu Khawla Mohassan, saw most of their fighters switch to other factions. Finally, it is exactly the systemic nature of the abuses, overseen by commanders, that makes them easier to stop. The brutally enforced discipline of the factions means that if commanders had no choice but to change, they could enact reforms.

In order to transform SNA-run zones from holding pens of desperate people seeking to flee into Turkey if they can afford the smuggling into stable regions where people want to live and even return to, the structural







causes of the SNA's abuses must be addressed. The financial need of the fighters and the impunity afforded to them will continue to incentivize abuses. To address these issues, a number of steps should be taken: A truly independent and well-armed military police force, possibly made up of Syrian civilians and Turks, should be established; the current set of commanders, all implicated in human rights abuses and profiteering, should be sidelined and ideally prosecuted; and the

salaries of the SNA's rank-and-file should be increased to a living wage to decrease the temptation of criminality. If Turkey views some of the commanders as indispensable to the reform process, they must be coerced to ensure the adherence of their fighters to basic human rights standards

Through its reliance on the SNA, Turkey has been able to achieve strategic successes in Syria and beyond. The growing assertiveness of the Biden administration and congressional hostility toward

Ankara limits Turkey's ability to continue to make gains in Syria at the expense of the SDF. This should give Ankara pause and encourage it to refocus its policies in Syria on secondary goals that Turkey's leadership has identified – namely, making areas under Turkish control in Syria truly safe. This would improve Turkey's damaged international reputation and, more important, finally give some respite to the hundreds of thousands war-weary inhabitants of the areas under SNA misrule. □



**Elizabeth Tsurkov** is a Non-Resident Fellow at the New Lines Institute, and a Research Fellow at the Forum for Regional Thinking, an Israeli-Palestinian think-tank based in Jerusalem. She is also a doctoral student in the Politics department at Princeton University. Her research focuses on the Levant, and particularly, the Syrian uprising and civil war. Her research is based on a large network of contacts – ordinary civilians, activists, combatants and communal, political and military leaders – which she has established across the Middle East and particularly in Syria, Iraq and Israel-Palestine. She has also conducted fieldwork in Syria, Jordan, Iraq, Turkey and other countries in the region. Elizabeth has over a decade of experience in volunteering and working for human rights organizations in the Middle East fighting for the rights of Palestinians, refugees and migrants, torture survivors, human trafficking victims and ethnic and religious minorities. Her work has appeared in the New York Times, New York Review of Books, Haaretz, Foreign Policy and other outlets. She speaks English, Hebrew, Russian and Levantine Arabic.





## Endnotes

- 1 Alterkawi, K, Assi, A, , Alabdallah, O, & Nasrallah, B. (2021). *The Demographic Change in Syria 2021-2011*. Jusoer for Studies. <https://www.jusoer.co/details/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AA%D8%AD%D9%88%D9%84-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%83%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%8A-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A9-/863/en>
- 2 Tsurkov, E. (2022, November 1). *The Syrian Mercenaries Fighting Foreign Wars for Russia and Turkey* | Elizabeth Tsurkov. The New York Review of Books. <https://www.nybooks.com/online/2020/10/16/the-syrian-mercenaries-fighting-foreign-wars-for-russia-and-turkey/>
- 3 A.Q. (2019, November 2). *How did the National Army Comment on the Handover of Regime Prisoners to Russia*. Baladi News. <https://bit.ly/33YgvUA>.
- 4 Kınıkhoğlu, S. (2020, February 21). *Syrian Refugees in Turkey: Changing Attitudes and Fortunes*. SWP. <https://www.swp-berlin.org/en/publication/syrian-refugees-in-turkey-changing-attitudes-and-fortunes>
- 5 Daily Sabah. (2022, May 10). *Turkey to build 200,000 homes for 1M Syrians to resettle voluntarily: Erdoğan*. Daily Sabah. <https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/turkey-to-build-200000-homes-for-1m-syrians-to-resettle-voluntarily-erdogan/news>
- 6 Lund, A. (2016, May 23). *Not Just Russia: The Iranian Surge in Syria*. Carnegie Middle East Center. <https://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/63650>.
- 7 Göksel, N. & Mandıracı, B. (2016, March 7). *New Turkey-PKK Peace Talks: An Inevitability Postponed*. Turkish Policy Quarterly. <http://turkishpolicy.com/article/785/new-turkey-pkk-peace-talks-an-inevitability-postponed>.
- 8 Fantappie, M. (2017, May 4). *The PKK's Fateful Choice in Northern Syria*. Crisis Group. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/eastern-mediterranean/syria/176-pkk-s-fateful-choice-northern-syria>.
- 9 WhatsApp interview with an official in the “Yazidi House” of the Jazira region, November 2019.
- 10 Amnesty International. (2018, August 2). *Syria: Turkey Must Stop Serious Violations by Allied Groups and Its Own Forces in Afrin*. Amnesty International. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2018/08/syria-turkey-must-stop-serious-violations-by-allied-groups-and-its-own-forces-in-afrin/>.
- 11 Between 44,000 to 60,500 Syrians who fled the 2019 Turkish incursion remain displaced as of 2022 according to the international NGO iMMAP. See: iMMAP, Thematic Report 6: Operation Peace Spring and Potential Turkish Intervention Scenarios, January 2022. [https://immap.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/RCM-Thematic-Report-6-Operation-Peace-Spring-and-Potential-Turkish-Intervention-Scenarios\\_2-2.pdf](https://immap.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/RCM-Thematic-Report-6-Operation-Peace-Spring-and-Potential-Turkish-Intervention-Scenarios_2-2.pdf)
- 12 Syrians for Truth and Justice. (2021, April 22). *Nothing Is Left of My Home except the Keys*/ Syrians for Truth and Justice. <https://stj-sy.org/en/nothing-is-left-of-my-home-except-keys/>.
- 13 Additionally, 2,596 (Kurdish) residents who have been displaced during the 2018 invasion were able to return. See <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/acaps-short-note-syria-humanitarian-needs-afrin-03-march-2021>.
- 14 Özkizilcik, O. (2020). *The Syrian National Army*. SETA. <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1OIER7nXUMZkePcy6ZpdRdnx8eKrKUNZ/view?usp=sharing>.
- 15 Interviews with SNA commanders, 2017-2021.
- 16 Interviews with a senior SNA commander and two administrative officers of two different factions, 2019-2021.
- 17 Interviews with a senior commander of an SNA faction, interviews with fighters in the Levant Front, al-Safwa al-Islamiyya (now defunct) and the Mutasim Division, 2016.
- 18 WhatsApp interview with the financial administrator of a faction within the 2nd Division, October 2021.
- 19 Interview with “Musa,” a commander of an SNA faction, April 2021; interview with an administrator of an SNA faction, March 2021; interview with a commander in the Amshat faction, March 2021.
- 20 Phone interview with a commander of an eastern Syrian faction, November 2021.
- 21 Phone interview with an administrative officers of Ahrar al-Sharqiyyah, November 2021.
- 22 Phone interview with a commander of an eastern Syria faction, October 2021.
- 23 Ibid.
- 24 See dozens of reports by Syrians for Truth and Justice: <https://stj-sy.org/>; UN Commission of Inquiry of the Syrian Arab Republic (2020, August 14). *No Clean Hands – behind the Frontlines and the Headlines, Armed Actors Continue to Subject Civilians to Horrific and Increasingly Targeted Abuse*. UN Commission of Inquiry of the Syrian Arab Republic. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2020/09/un-commission-inquiry-syria-no-clean-hands-behind-frontlines-and-headlines?LangID=E&NewsID=26237>; UN Commission of Inquiry of the Syrian Arab Republic (2021, March 1). *Arbitrary Imprisonment and Detention*. UN Commission of Inquiry of the Syrian Arab Republic. <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/IIICISyria/Pages/Detention-report.aspx>; Human Rights Watch. (2019, November 27). *Syria: Civilians Abused in ‘Safe Zones.’* Human Rights Watch. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/11/27/syria-civilians-abused-safe-zones>; Amnesty International (2018, August 2). *Syria: Turkey Must Stop Serious Violations by Allied Groups and Its Own Forces in Afrin*. Amnesty International. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2018/08/syria-turkey-must-stop-serious-violations-by-allied-groups-and-its-own-forces-in-afrin/>.
- 25 Author observations, 2019-2021. For example, during a get-together of Syrian refugees in Gaziantep, southern Turkey, shortly after the 2019 invasion of northeast Syria, a commander from the Hamza Division and a commander from Ahrar al-Sharqiyyah openly bragged about how their factions were able to steal cars and smuggle them out of northeast Syria into Turkey, passing a search at Turkish checkpoints, by taking the cars apart and smuggling the pieces separately. A recording of the discussion was provided to the author by one of the attendees, a Syrian refugee disgusted by it. December 2019.
- 26 Interview with writer and activist residing in “Euphrates Shield” areas, June 2021.
- 27 “Arbitrary Imprisonment and Detention.”





- 28 Andrzejewski, C., Miñano, L., and Alasaad, D. (2017, February 13). *How the Assad Regime Used Child Rape as a Weapon of War*. Zero Impunity. <https://zeroimpunity.com/how-the-assad-regime-used-child-rape-as-a-weapon-of-war/?lang=en>; Forestier, M. (2017, February 1). *You Want Freedom? This Is Your Freedom: Rape as a Tactic of the Assad Regime*. LSE Women, Peace and Security Blog. <https://zeroimpunity.com/how-the-assad-regime-used-child-rape-as-a-weapon-of-war/?lang=en>; Lawyers and Doctors for Human Rights. (2019, March). *'The Soul Has Died' Male Sexual Violence Report*. Lawyers and Doctors for Human Rights. <http://ldhrights.org/en/?p=6412>; UN Commission of Inquiry of the Syrian Arab Republic. (2018, March 8). *'I Lost My Dignity': Sexual and Gender-Based Violence in the Syrian Arab Republic*. UN Commission of Inquiry of the Syrian Arab Republic. <https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/CoISyria/A-HRC-37-CRP-3.pdf>.
- 29 Wilgenburg, W. (2020, May 21). *Allegations of Forced Marriages Emerge in Turkish-Controlled Afrin in Syria*. Kurdistan24. <https://www.kurdistan24.net/en/story/22518-Allegations-of-forced-marriages-emerge-in-Turkish-controlled-Afrin-in-Syria>; UN Commission of Inquiry of the Syrian Arab Republic. (2020, August). *No Clean Hands – behind the Frontlines and the Headlines, Armed Actors Continue to Subject Civilians to Horrific and Increasingly Targeted Abuse*. UN Commission of Inquiry of the Syrian Arab Republic. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2020/09/un-commission-inquiry-syria-no-clean-hands-behind-frontlines-and-headlines>
- 30 “The guards would enter the cells of the women at night,” reported Hassan, the activist kidnapped and tortured by the Hamza Division. Interview in southern Turkey, July 2019.
- 31 Sami, an activist displaced from southern Syria to northern Aleppo in 2018, was visiting a friend near Rajo (Reco), in the Afrin district, when he noticed that a group of Syrian National Army (SNA) fighters, from the Hamza Division who entered a neighboring house at night left it only in the morning. He asked his friend to explain what he witnessed, and the friend explained that this is the home of an old Kurdish couple who’ve been robbed by the SNA. “After there was nothing left for them to take, they started taking the man’s wife by force.” Sami complained to the SNA’s Military Police, who told him they are powerless to stop it. He went to the Turkish officer in charge, crying and upset, demanding this stop. “I think my emotional state and crying, and when I compared these crimes to those of the regime, convinced the hardened officer that he needs to do something.” The Hamza Division sub-unit was rotated out, to be replaced by another sub-group from the same faction. The incoming group continued to rob residents, but the nightly visits stopped. Interview with “Sami,” an activist and teacher displaced from Qalamoun who lived in northern Aleppo, May 2019.
- 32 Al-Khateb, K. (2021, March 2). *Free Syrian Army getting backup from Turkish-trained police*. Al-Monitor. <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2017/03/turkey-trained-free-syrian-police-deployed-in-northern-aleppo.html>
- 33 Author phone interview with Mustafa, an activist displaced from eastern Ghouta to Afrin who has engaged with Turkish officers concerning attempts to bring about the removal of the factions from cities following the clashes in Afrin in May 2020 that brought about the exposure of the Hamza Faction black site. May 2020.
- 34 al-Khatib, K. (2018, March 22). *The Opposition Announces the Formation of Military Police in the Euphrates Shield Area*. Al-Monitor. <https://www.al-monitor.com/ar/contents/articles/originals/2018/03/syria-opposition-military-police-euphrates-national-army.html>.
- 35 WhatsApp interview with “Kamil,” an SNA MP commander loyal to Faylaq al-Sham, February 2021. Phone interview with “Zahran,” an officer in the al-Bab MP, and “Kamil,” an officer with the Afrin MP, 2020.
- 36 WhatsApp conversation with a commander in the ranks of the 9th Division, May 2020; WhatsApp Interview with a member of the Jarablus MP, one 50 former Jaysh al-Islam fighters who joined the MP in Jarablus, May 2020.
- 37 WhatsApp and phone interviews with three MP officers stationed in al-Bab, Afrin, and Tel Abyad, 2020-2021.
- 38 WhatsApp interviews with an officer of the Tel Abyad MP, March 2021 and May 2021.
- 39 “No Clean Hands – behind the Frontlines and the Headlines, Armed Actors Continue to Subject Civilians to Horrific and Increasingly Targeted Abuse.”
- 40 The Commission of Inquiry report was specifically brought up in a meeting between senior leadership of Turkish mukhabarat and the commanders of the SNA factions. Interviews with a commander of an SNA faction and “Hachem,” a member of the Afrin Committee, 2020. Hachem described the series of meetings Turkish intelligence convened on the matter: “there was no possibility to refuse. The meetings were basically forcing upon us orders to enact reforms.”
- 41 Enab Baladi. (2021, February 26). *Six Months After its Formation...What has the Ombudsman Committee Accomplished?* Enab Baladi. <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/461365>.
- 42 WhatsApp interview with “Hachem,” a member of the Committee, October 2020.
- 43 WhatsApp interviews with “Hachem,” a member of the Committee, March 2021 and May 2021.
- 44 Interview with a commander of an SNA faction, April 2021.
- 45 WhatsApp interview with “Omar,” an administrator at one of the eastern Syrian factions, July 2020.
- 46 WhatsApp interview with “Jaber,” a commander in the Amshat faction, May 2021; WhatsApp interview with “Amin,” a Jaysh al-Islam fighter, May 2021; WhatsApp interview with “Majdi,” an Amshat fighter, May 2021.
- 47 Video interview with “Abu Ayman,” February 2021.
- 48 WhatsApp interview with “Hossam,” an administrator in the Amshat faction, February 2021.
- 49 All these methods are borrowed from Syrian regime prisons. See: Syrian Network for Human Rights. (2019, October 21.) *Documentation of 72 Torture Methods the Syrian Regime*. Syrian Network for Human Rights. <https://sn4hr.org/blog/2019/10/21/54362/>.
- 50 WhatsApp interview with “Sami,” an Amshat fighter killed in Libya, May 2020; WhatsApp interview with “Omar,” an administrator at one of the eastern Syrian factions, July 2020; Video chat with “Abu Ayman,” a senior Amshat commander deployed to Libya, February 2021.
- 51 WhatsApp interview with “Amin,” a Jaysh al-Islam fighter, May 2021.
- 52 Tsurkov, E. & al-Agyl, E. (2019, July 24). *Kurdish-Arab Power Struggle in Northeastern Syria*. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. <https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/79542>.





- [illegible]



- 78 WhatsApp interview with “Hadi,” an employee of the al-Bab Local Council, March 2021.
- 79 Phone interview with “Abdullah,” an Arab activist from Aleppo living in Afrin, May 2020; phone interview with “Suleiman,” an executive for a major NGO operating in SNA areas, May 2020.
- 80 al-Ahmed, B. (2022, August 11). *Northern Syria: Clashes Between Opposition Factions Lead to the Permanent Presence of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham in Afrin*. <https://stj-sy.org/en/northern-syria-clashes-between-opposition-factions-lead-to-the-permanent-presence-of-hayat-tahrir-al-sham-in-afrin/>.
- 81 Al-Hilu, K. (2019). *Afrin under Turkish Control: Political, Economic and Social Transformations*. European University Institute. <https://doi.org/10.2870/136668>.
- 82 Interview with “Sami,” an activist and teacher living in al-Bab, May 2019; Interview with “Abdullah,” an activist living in Afrin; Interview with Suleiman, executive at a local NGO, May 2020.
- 83 Hatahet, S. (2021, March 25). *The Recovery of the Local Economy in Northern Aleppo : Reality and Challenges*. European University Institute. <https://doi.org/10.2870/557464>; Al-Hilu, K. (2021). *The Turkish Intervention in Northern Syria: One Strategy, Discrepant Policies*. European University Institute. <https://doi.org/10.2870/72894>.
- 84 Al-Hilu, K. (2021). *The Turkish Intervention in Northern Syria: One Strategy, Discrepant Policies, Technical Report*. European University Institute. <https://doi.org/10.2870/72894>.
- 85 Interview with “Sami,” a teacher in al-Bab, May 2019; Hatahet, S. (2021, March 25). *The Recovery of the Local Economy in Northern Aleppo: Reality and Challenges*. European University Institute. <https://doi.org/10.2870/557464>; Masri, Z. (2021, March 3). *Turkey Is Shaping Northern Syria's Economy—but Who Is Benefitting?* Enab Baladi. <https://english.enabbaladi.net/archives/2021/03/turkey-shaping-northern-syrias-economy-who-is-benefitting/>; Al-Hilu, K. (2021). *The Turkish Intervention in Northern Syria: One Strategy, Discrepant Policies*. European University Institute. <https://doi.org/10.2870/72894>.
- 86 “The first and last word goes to the Turkish “adviser,” when it comes to appointments of teachers, firing or penalizing them. All the officials in the SIG’s Ministry of Education are fig leaves who do nothing and take a salary at the end of every month,” said “Raouf,” a school principal in Afrin, March 2021 WhatsApp interview.
- 87 WhatsApp interview with “Hadi,” March 2021.
- 88 Hatahet, S. (2021, March 25). *The Recovery of the Local Economy in Northern Aleppo : Reality and Challenges*. European University Institute. <https://doi.org/10.2870/557464>; Omar, FA; Mahmoud, I; Hussian, A; Mohr, L; Abdullah, HO; Farzat, A. (2020, July). *The Effect of the Syrian Crisis on Electricity Supply and the Household Life in North-West Syria: A University-Based Study*. *Education and Conflict Review* 3: 77–86; *Humanitarian Situation Overview in Syria (HSOS): Northwest Syria, March 2021*. (2021, April 18). REACH. <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/humanitarian-situation-overview-syria-hsos-northwest-syria-march-2021>.
- 89 Daher, M., Martinez, J., and Elamein, M. (2020, July). *Health Resources Availability Monitoring System: Second Quarter, 2020 Report*. *Gaziantep: Turkey Health Cluster for Northern Syria*. [https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/sites/www.humanitarianresponse.info/files/documents/files/herams\\_2nd\\_quarter\\_2020\\_final.pdf](https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/sites/www.humanitarianresponse.info/files/documents/files/herams_2nd_quarter_2020_final.pdf).
- 90 UN H NAP. (2021, April). *Socio-Economic and Shelter Conditions | Spring 2021 Report Series*. UN H NAP. <https://drive.google.com/file/d/li0bu7dJzf5eKf08tT7lxjzAAAF87bybE/view?usp=sharing>.
- 91 Interview with “Raouf,” a school principal in Afrin, March 2021.
- 92 al-Khatib, K. (2018, June 21). *Turkey Invests in Education in Northern Syria*. Al-Monitor. <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2018/06/turkish-harran-university-open-campus-northern-syria-al-bab.html>; Musa, E. & Koparan, O. (2019, November 25). *Turkish University Offering Education in Northern Syria*. Anadolu Agency. <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/education/turkish-university-offering-education-in-northern-syria/1654838>.
- 93 UN H NAP. (2021, April). *Socio-Economic and Shelter Conditions | Spring 2021 Report Series*. UN H NAP. <https://drive.google.com/file/d/li0bu7dJzf5eKf08tT7lxjzAAAF87bybE/view?usp=sharing>.
- 94 The UN’s World Food Program defines the Survival Minimum Expenditure Basket (SMEB) as “the absolute minimum amount required to maintain existence and cover lifesaving needs, which could involve the deprivation of certain human rights.” It includes items such as shelter, food, health, education, utilities, transportation and communication. See World Food Program (2020, December). *Minimum Expenditure Baskets: Guidance Note*. World Food Program. <https://docs.wfp.org/api/documents/WFP-0000074198/download/>.
- For the REACH assessment *Humanitarian Situation Overview in Syria (HSOS): Northwest Syria, March 2021*. (2021, April 18). REACH. <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/humanitarian-situation-overview-syria-hsos-northwest-syria-march-2021>.
- 95 According to an UN H NAP estimate from Spring 2021, 83% of men living under SNA control reported to have worked most of the time in the past 3 months, but only 8% of women reported the same. Thus, the majority of the population is unemployed. UN H NAP. (2021, April). *Socio-Economic and Shelter Conditions | Spring 2021 Report Series*. UN H NAP. <https://drive.google.com/file/d/li0bu7dJzf5eKf08tT7lxjzAAAF87bybE/view?usp=sharing>.
- 96 ACAPS. (2021, March 3). *ACAPS Short Note: Syria: Humanitarian Needs in Afrin*. ACAPS. <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/acaps-short-note-syria-humanitarian-needs-afrin-03-march-2021>.
- 97 “Humanitarian Situation Overview in Syria (HSOS).”
- 98 Faysal, a livestock trader, described it thus: “People can’t afford to buy meat with their salaries. People come and buy like 300 grams of meat and ask for bones because they just want the food to have a flavor of meat and the bones do a good job. Imagine, butchers started selling bones, and you can’t sell bones without selling meat. The only people who can buy meat are from the factions, rarely, and employees of the police or teachers do a bit better and can buy meat once a month, maybe. The rest can’t ever afford it.” Phone interview with “Faysal,” March 2021.
- 99 IMPACT. (2019, May). *Socioeconomic Impact of Displacement Waves in Northern Syria*. IMPACT. <https://www.impact-csrd.org/publications/socioeconomic-impact-of-displacement-waves-in-northern-syria/>





- 100 Hatahet, S. (2021, March 25). *The Recovery of the Local Economy in Northern Aleppo : Reality and Challenges*. European University Institute. <https://cadmus.eui.eu/handle/1814/70658>
- 101 UN H NAP. (2021, April). *Socio-Economic and Shelter Conditions / Spring 2021 Report Series*. UN H NAP. <https://drive.google.com/file/d/li0bu7dJzf5eKf08tT7lxjzAAAF87bybE/view?usp=sharing>.
- 102 Baladi News. (2017, November 23). *Turkey Opens a Branch of PTT in al-Bab*. Baladi News. November 23, 2017, <https://bit.ly/2Rx4J00>; Baladi News. (2018, March 10). *In Jarablus, PTT Offers Services to Syrians and Turks*. Baladi News. <https://bit.ly/3ykBG1g>; Enab Baladi. (2020, November 13). *What are the Services that PTT Centers Provide in Northern Syria?* <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/431434>.
- 103 al-Aswad, H. (2020, June 17). *Turkish Currency Begins to Spread in Syria in Blow for Crisis-Hit Damascus*. Middle East Eye. <http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/ankara-syria-turkish-currency-spread-gains-losses>.
- 104 Hatahet, S. (2021, March 25). *The Recovery of the Local Economy in Northern Aleppo : Reality and Challenges*. European University Institute. <https://doi.org/10.2870/557464>; Bakkour, J. (2019, November 26). *Turkey Reopens the Tal Abyad Crossing with Syria*. al-Araby al-Jadeed. <https://bit.ly/3eNe8u2>.
- 105 For some of the prominent publications about Syria's war economy, see: Hall, N., Smith, B., McGee, T. (2019, October 3). *Local Crossline Coordination in Syria*. United States Institute of Peace. <https://www.usip.org/publications/2019/10/local-cross-line-coordination-syria>; Daher, J. (2018). *The Political Economic Context of Syria's Reconstruction : A Prospective in Light of a Legacy of Unequal Development*. <https://doi.org/10.2870/564167>
- 106 Phone interview with "Ziad," a trader living in Turkey who conducts business with SNA areas, May 2021.
- 107 Aldasouky, A. (2021, May 8). *Networks of the War Economy in Syria...Their Effects and What is Required of Them*. Syria Net. <https://www.alsouria.net/امو-اهراتا-ةيروس-يف-برحل-ا-امو-اهراتا-ةيروس-يف-برحل-ا-داصتقا-الكش>.
- 108 Hatahet, S. (2021, March 25). *The Recovery of the Local Economy in Northern Aleppo: Reality and Challenges*. European University Institute. <https://doi.org/10.2870/557464>.
- 109 WhatsApp interviews with commanders from Jaysh al-Islam, Ahrar al-Sharqiyah and the Amshat faction, May 2021.
- 110 Turkish products are widely available in in regime areas, despite regime efforts to prevent this Amidst the Discontent of Aleppo Merchants: *The Syrian Regime is Waging a War Against Turkish Goods*. (2021, January 3). al-Quds al-Arabi. <https://bit.ly/3oiEFmd>.
- 111 Individuals being smuggled from regime areas then attempt to cross into Turkey mostly from Idlib, rather than northern Aleppo, due to the challenges of policing the rugged Idlib terrain. Conversations with Syrians smuggled into Turkey, 2017-2021.
- 112 Conversations with Syrians who smuggled themselves into Turkey, as well as SNA members involved in smuggling of persons into Turkey, 2020-2021.
- 113 For example, Hussein and Firas al-Sultani, the brothers of Abu Barzan, the commander of Division 20, who are also senior commanders within the force, are involved in smuggling of refugees into Turkey. Interview with "Ammar," a former Ahrar al-Sharqiyah commander, May 2021.
- 114 Turkish intelligence officials confronted the commanders of the SNA factions on several occasions with information proving the involvement of SNA commanders in the smuggling operations, after commanders initially denied this. Author conversations with senior SNA commanders, 2020-2021.
- 115 WhatsApp interview with "Salah," a trader working in northern Aleppo, January 2021.
- 116 WhatsApp interview with "Shadi," a trader trading in cars and foodstuffs imported from Turkey to Syria, who works closely with the Sultan Murad Division, April 2021; WhatsApp interview with "Issam," an independent trader importing goods from Turkey, April 2021; WhatsApp conversation with a Hamza Division fighter stationed in Rajo (Reco), May 2021.
- 117 WhatsApp interview with "Basil," an independent trader living in al-Bab who imports goods from Turkey, April 2021; WhatsApp interview with "Daoud," a car trader working with the Sultan Murad Division, April 2021;
- 118 Phone interview with "Marwan," an SNA MP officer in charge of coordination with Turkish intelligence, January 2021; phone interview with "Zaher," a senior Jaysh al-Islam commander, May 2021.
- 119 The drug trade has also prompted episodes of infighting, for example in April 2021, between two sub-groups of the Sultan Murad Division in Ras al-Ayn, over control of drug smuggling. *Drugs Ignite a War between Factions of the National Army in Ras al-Ain*. (2021, April 2019). *RuMaf*. <https://rumaf.net/?p=66938>. This account was confirmed by an SNA fighter stationed in Ras al-Ayn in a WhatsApp conversation, May 2021.
- 120 Hassan, M. (2021, January 22). *The Largest Drug Shipment in Northern Syria...The Regime and the SDF are Involved*. almodon. <https://www.almodon.com/arabworld/2021/1/22/ناطروتم-دسقو-م-اظنل-ا-يروس-ال-امشال-ا-يف-تاردم-ةنحش-ربكأ>
- 121 *Asayish: The Largest Drug Smuggling Operation in Northeast Syria was Thwarted*. (2021, April 12). Enab Baladi <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/473357>.
- 122 Phone interview with "Nasser," an Amshat fighter deployed in Libya, June 2020; Phone interview with "Abu Ayman," an Amshat commander deployed in Libya, February 2021; Interview with "Farouq," a Suqur al-Shimmal fighter deployed in Libya, January 2020.
- 123 *Al-Bab Residents Complain that Armed Men Storm Pharmacies*. (2017, October 3). Enab Baladi. <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/176216>.
- 124 Video call interview with "Abu Ayman," a senior Amshat commander who deployed to Libya, February 2021; Phone interview with two Liwaa al-Shimmal fighters deployed in Libya, January 2020.
- 125 Syrians for Truth and Justice. (2021, March 18). *Syrian Mercenaries in Libya: Fraudster Commanders and Recruits Involved in Serious Violations*. Syrians for Truth and Justice. <https://stj-sy.org/en/syrian-mercenaries-in-libya-commanders-and-recruits-involved-in-serious-violations/>.
- 126 Phone interview with "Ammar," a former Ahrar al-Sharqiyah commander, May 2021; Phone interview with "Ziad," a trader operating in northern Aleppo, May 2021; WhatsApp interview with "Daoud," a trader working with SNA factions, April 2021.
- 127 Phone interview with "Ammar," a former senior commander in the ranks of Ahrar al-Sharqiyah, May 2021.







- 128 Puttick, M., Al-Kaisi, Y and Bilikhodze, M. (2020, July 27). *Cultivating Chaos: Afrin after Operation Olive Branch*. Ceasefire and Yasa. <https://www.ceasefire.org/turkey-orchestrating-destruction-demographic-change-in-northern-syria-new-report/>; al-Bouz, D. (2019, March 29). The Tragedy of Afrin's Olives in Light of the 'Olive Branch. Daraj. <https://daraj.com/16077/>.
- 129 Phone interview with Hachem, a member of the committee set up to return stolen properties to their owners in Afrin, October 2020.
- 130 The factions also appropriated state lands in the region. Those who work on lands that are not their own are forced to pay 35 percent of the revenue to the factions. Phone interview with "Zubair," a trader based in Turkey, September 2020.
- 131 Al-Jisr. (2020, September 18). *National Army Factions Impose a \$10 Royalty on every Ton of Wheat in Ras al-Ain*. al-Jisr. <https://www.jesrpress.com/لود-١٠-اهراقم-قوات-أضرفت-ين طول-ال-أصاف>; Tevna Kurdi. (2020, July 7). *Research Report on Agricultural Crops in Ras Al-Ayn / Seré Kaniyé*. Tevna Kurdi. <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5e7c9110d8321064eal1f185/t/5f04b17561e3803alecc70a2/1594143095686/Research+report+on+agricultural+cropsIn+Ras+Al-Ayn+%3A+Sere+Kanye.pdf>.
- 132 Phone interview with "Ziad," May 2021.
- 133 Hear this recording of an Ahrar al-Sharqiyah commander discussing goods he stole in Afrin, which he offered for sale in al-Bab. Alhussein, S. (2019). *A Leaked Recording of a Leader of Ahrar al-Sharqiyah*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k4hGNs9og5Y>.
- 134 Author conversations with members of the Levant Front and Hamza Division concerning the smuggling of car parts stolen during the 2019 offensive on northeast Syria, December 2019. Some of the stolen olive oil went on to be sold in Europe. Petti, M. (2020, November 23). *The Olive Oil in Your Local Store May Be Funding Syrian Warlords*. The Daily Beast. <https://www.thedailybeast.com/the-olive-oil-in-your-local-store-may-be-funding-syrian-warlords>; al-Ahmed, B. (2020, June 21). *Following Operation Peace Spring, Thousands of Tons of Grain Seized as 'Spoils of War'*. Syrians for Truth and Justice. <https://stj-sy.org/en/following-operation-peace-spring-thousands-of-tons-of-grain-seized-as-spoils-of-war/>.
- 135 According to Zubair, a trader working in the sale of grains, Ahrar al-Sharqiyah and Jaysh al-Sharqiyah sold \$3 million worth of wheat to the Assad regime through the Qaterji brothers from five silos they took over in the areas of Ras al-Ayn, Tel Abyad, Suluk and Mabrouka. interview with "Zubair," September 2020. See also Euphrates Post. *Ahrar al-Sharqiyah Sells the Seized Wheat to the Qaterji militia (photo)*. (2019, December 9). Euphrates Post. <https://euphratespost.net/تس-ال-م-ال-قري-زج-ال-ح-م-ق-ع-ي-ب-ت-ق-ي-ق-ر-ش-ال-را-ح/>.
- 136 Interview with "Zahran," an officer with the al-Bab MP, October 2020; Interview with Hachem, a member of the committee established to return stolen properties to Afrin residents, October 2020; Syrians for Truth and Justice. (2022, June 30). *How is "Abu Amsha" Making Millions of Dollars Every Year?* <https://stj-sy.org/en/how-is-abu-amsha-making-millions-of-dollars-every-year/>
- 137 Interview with "Zahran," an officer with the al-Bab MP, October 2020.
- 138 Author conversations with fighters in the Amshat faction, Hamza Division, Mutasim Brigade and Liwa' al-Shimmal, all living in stolen Kurdish homes in Afrin, 2019-2021; On the squatting phenomenon, see IMPACT. (2019, May 18). *Socioeconomic Impact of Displacement Waves in Northern Syria*. IMPACT. <https://www.impact-csr.org/socioeconomic-impact-of-displacement-waves-in-northern-syria/>.
- 139 See for example this contract between a displaced person from Daraa and a commander in the Levant Front for a sum of \$300 monthly <https://twitter.com/Elizrael/status/1160827484163727360>
- 140 Phone interview with "Zahran," an officer in the al-Bab MP who attempted to return confiscated homes to their owners, October 2020; phone interview with "Hachem," a member of the committee set up in Afrin to return properties to their owners, October 2020; Phone interview with "Ammar," a former commander in the ranks of Ahrar al-Sharqiyah, May 2021.
- 140 Phone interview with "Zubair," a trader operating in SNA areas, September 2020.
- 141 Syrians for Truth and Justice. (2022, June). *How is "Abu Amsha" Making Millions of Dollars Every Year?* Syrians for Truth and Justice.
- 142 al-Ahmed, B. (2020, March 9). Afrin: Shaykh Al Hadid: Intimidation and Economic Tightening. Syrians for Truth and Justice. <https://stj-sy.org/en/afrin-shaykh-al-hadid-intimidation-and-economic-tightening/>.
- 143 Interview with an Arab activist based in Afrin, February 2022.
- 144 Interviews with an Ahrar al-Sharqiyah fighter stationed near Ras al-Ayn, May 2021; Interview with "Zubair," a grain trader working with SNA factions, September 2020; Interview with a resident of Rajo, September 2021; Interview with an Arab activist based in Afrin, March 2022.
- 145 In a phone interview with "Firas," a Syrian trader based in Turkey who works closely with the commander of an SNA faction he explicitly described these ventures as "money laundering," September 2020.
- 146 See for example this supermarket run by the Amshat faction: *The Opening of Sheikh Hadid Mall with the Support of the Leadership of the Sultan Suleiman Shah Brigade*. (2021) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iIGvG0FpvcU>.
- 147 See the opening of a restaurant by the Amshat faction: *Under the Patronage of Sheikh Hadid, the Gendarmerie, the local council, and the council of notables, Sheikh al-Hadid Café was Opened*. (2021) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8cHeHe0roGI>.
- 148 See a video produced by the Amshat faction about the opening of the refurbished gas station: *Restoration of a Gas Station in Sheikh al-Hadid District, with the Support of the Sultan Suleiman Shah Brigade*. (2021) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JlrIOUS9lkw>.
- 149 Interviews with "Firas," a gold trader; "Zaher," a Jaysh al-Islam commander; "Daoud," a trader importing cars for Sultan Murad; "Issam," a trader working with multiple factions to import goods from Turkey, 2020-2021.
- 150 Interview with "Zaher," a senior Jaysh al-Islam commander, May 2021. In fact, the negotiations for the displacement from Harasta, the first to take place as part of the series of displacements from eastern Ghouta, was delayed due to the insistence of traders linked to Ahrar al-Sham to be able to bring out their cash with them, prolonging the duration of the siege and bombardment. See: Dalati, R. [@Dalatrm]. (2018, March 18). *Negotiations for #Harasta reportedly stalled. Main point of contention was Ahrar Al-Sham and local war profiteers insisting on leaving with all non-military supplies in their underground stores*. Twitter. <https://twitter.com/Dalatrm/status/975426454451359744>
- 151 Phone interview with "Zaher," a senior Jaysh al-Islam commander, May 2021.





- 152 Phone interview with “Firas,” a Syrian trader based in Turkey, September 2020.
- 153 Phone interview with “Ammar,” a former Ahrar al-Sharqiyah commander now living in Turkey, May 2021.
- 154 Zwijnenburg, W & Shi, Y. (2020, June 30). *A River of Death*. PAX for Peace. <https://paxforpeace.nl/what-we-do/publications/a-river-of-death>.
- 155 Phone interview with “Ziad,” a trader working in SNA regions, May 2021.
- 156 Waters, G. *Between Ankara and Damascus: The Role of the Turkish State in North Aleppo*. Middle East Institute. <https://www.mei.edu/publications/between-ankara-and-damascus-role-turkish-state-north-aleppo>.
- 157 Children who enter the tankers in which the oil is being burned and clean it receive \$50 per month. Adults earn between \$80-100 monthly. WhatsApp conversation with a displaced person from Ghouta working in refining near the city of al-Bab, May 2021.
- 158 STEP News. (2021, March 22). *Tarhin Burners. the Local Market for Black Gold Trade in Northern Syria and the Joker of the Syrian Regime, the Savior of Crises*. STEP News. <https://stepagency-sy.net/2021/03/22/%D8%AD%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%82%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%AA%D8%B1%D8%AD%D9%8A%D9%86/>.
- 159 Phone interview with “Firas,” a trader working with SNA factions, September 2020.
- 160 WhatsApp interview with an Amshat fighter, May 2021.
- 161 WhatsApp interview with an Ahrar al-Sharqiyah fighter, May 2021.
- 162 Phone interview with “Zaher,” a senior Jaysh al-Islam commander, May 2021.
- 163 WhatsApp interview with a commander in the Levant Front from western Aleppo, October 2022.
- 164 WhatsApp interview with a commander within the Amshat faction, October 2022; WhatsApp interview with an SNA commander inside one of the Turkish-run operations rooms, November 2022.
- 165 WhatsApp interview with a Hamzat commander originally from northern Homs, October 2022; WhatsApp interview with an SNA commander inside one of the Turkish-run operations rooms, November 2022.
- 166 WhatsApp interviews with a commander from the Hamza Division and an HTS commander, October 2022.
- 167 WhatsApp conversation with a fuel trader living in Afrîn who regularly crosses the al-Humran Crossing, October 2022; Conversation with a local journalist who visited the checkpoints in early November 2022.
- 168 WhatsApp interviews with an HTS commander and a commander in an eastern Syrian SNA faction, October 2022.
- 169 U.S. Department of Treasury. (2021, July 28). *Treasury Sanctions Syrian Regime Prisons, Officials, and Syrian Armed Group*. U.S. Department of Treasury. <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/jy0292>



## Contact



For media inquiries, email [media@newlinesinstitute.org](mailto:media@newlinesinstitute.org)



To submit a piece to the New Lines Institute,  
email [submissions@newlinesinstitute.org](mailto:submissions@newlinesinstitute.org)



For other inquiries, send an email to [info@newlinesinstitute.org](mailto:info@newlinesinstitute.org)



1776 Massachusetts Ave N.W. Suite 120  
Washington, D.C. 20036



(202) 800-7302

## Connect With Us



@newlinesinst



@New Lines Institute  
for Strategy and Policy



Subscribe



Sign up